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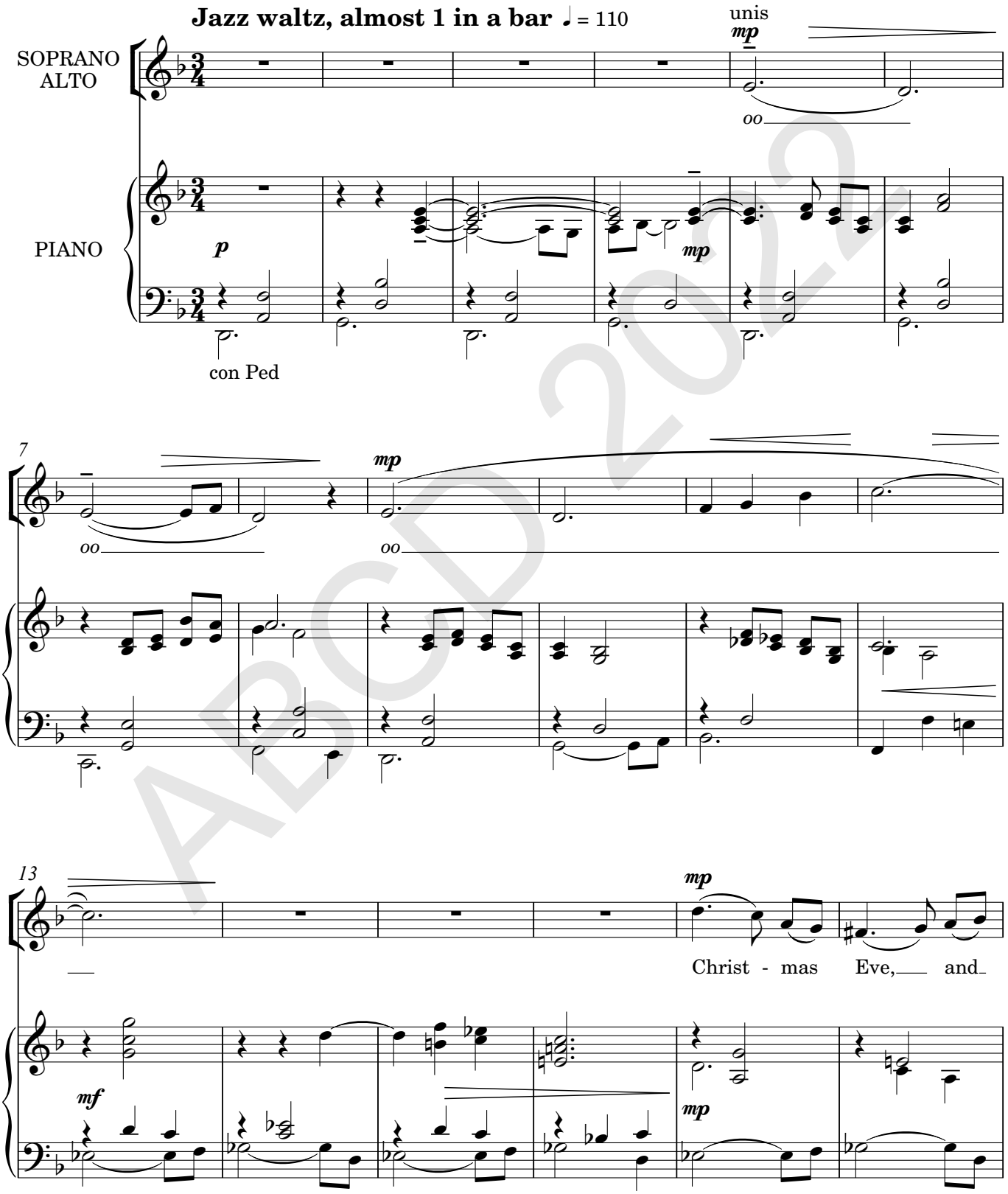
for Opera North Children's Chorus

THE OXEN

Words by
THOMAS HARDY
(1840–1928)

Music by
RICHARD WILBERFORCE
(b 1984)



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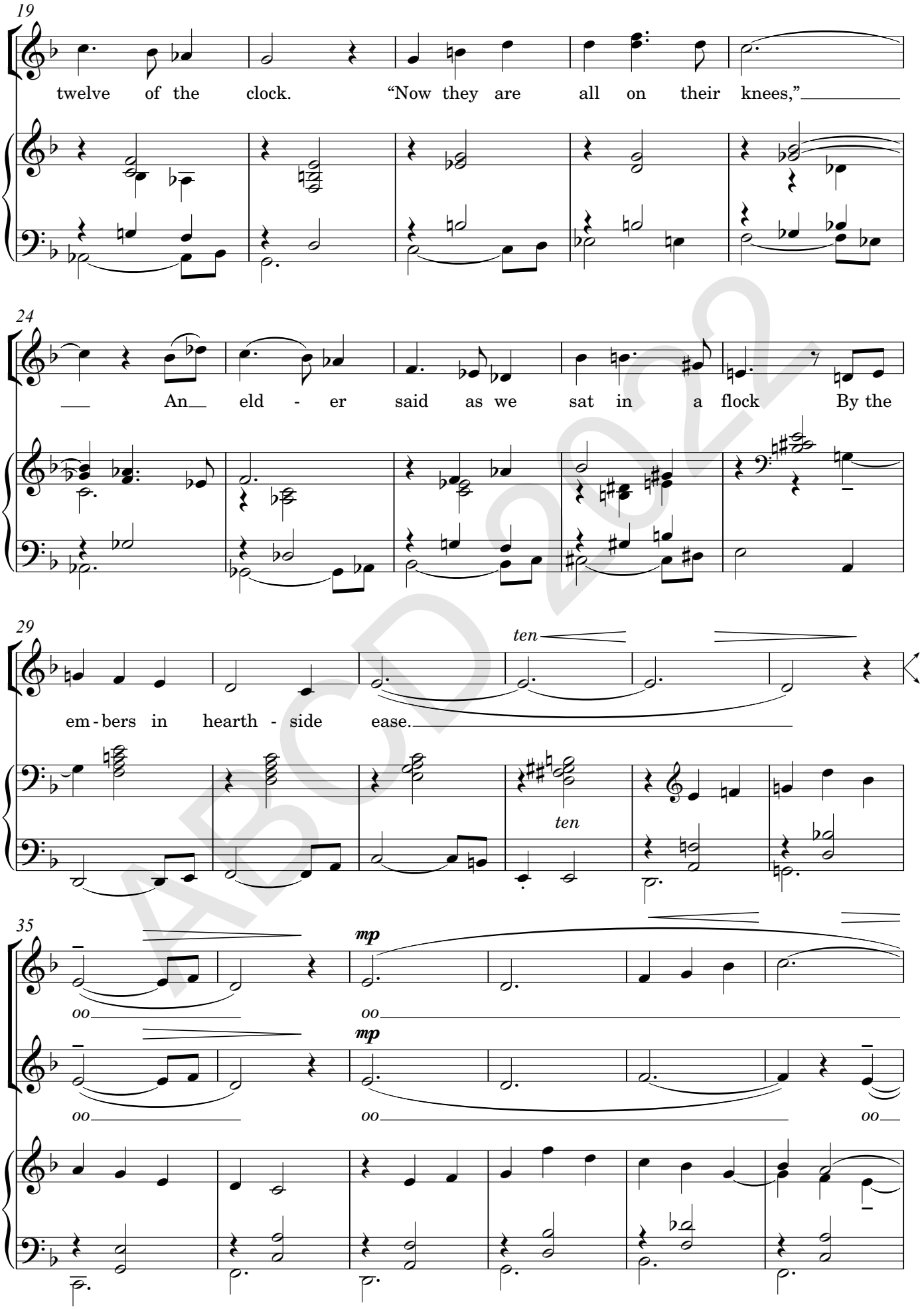
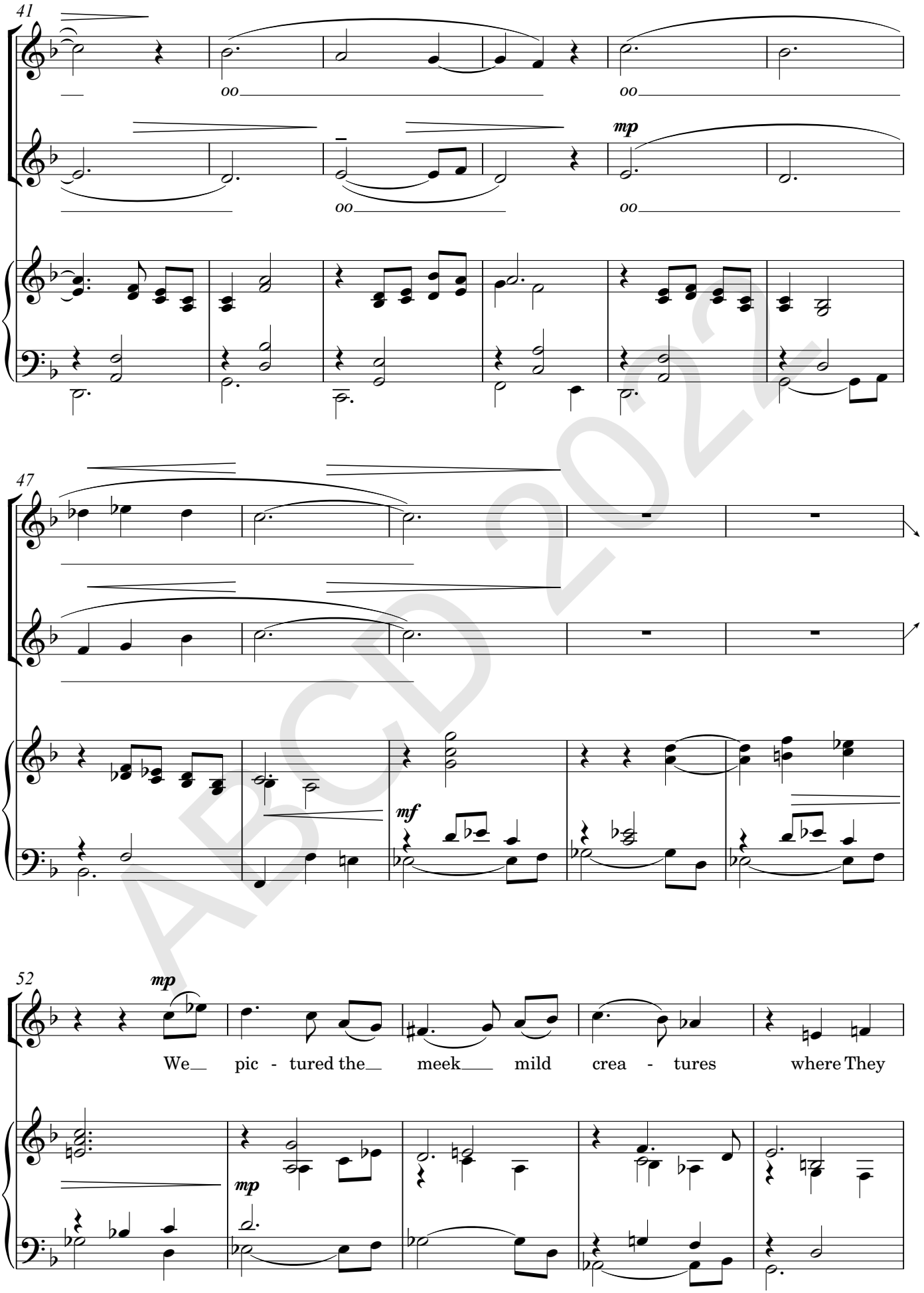
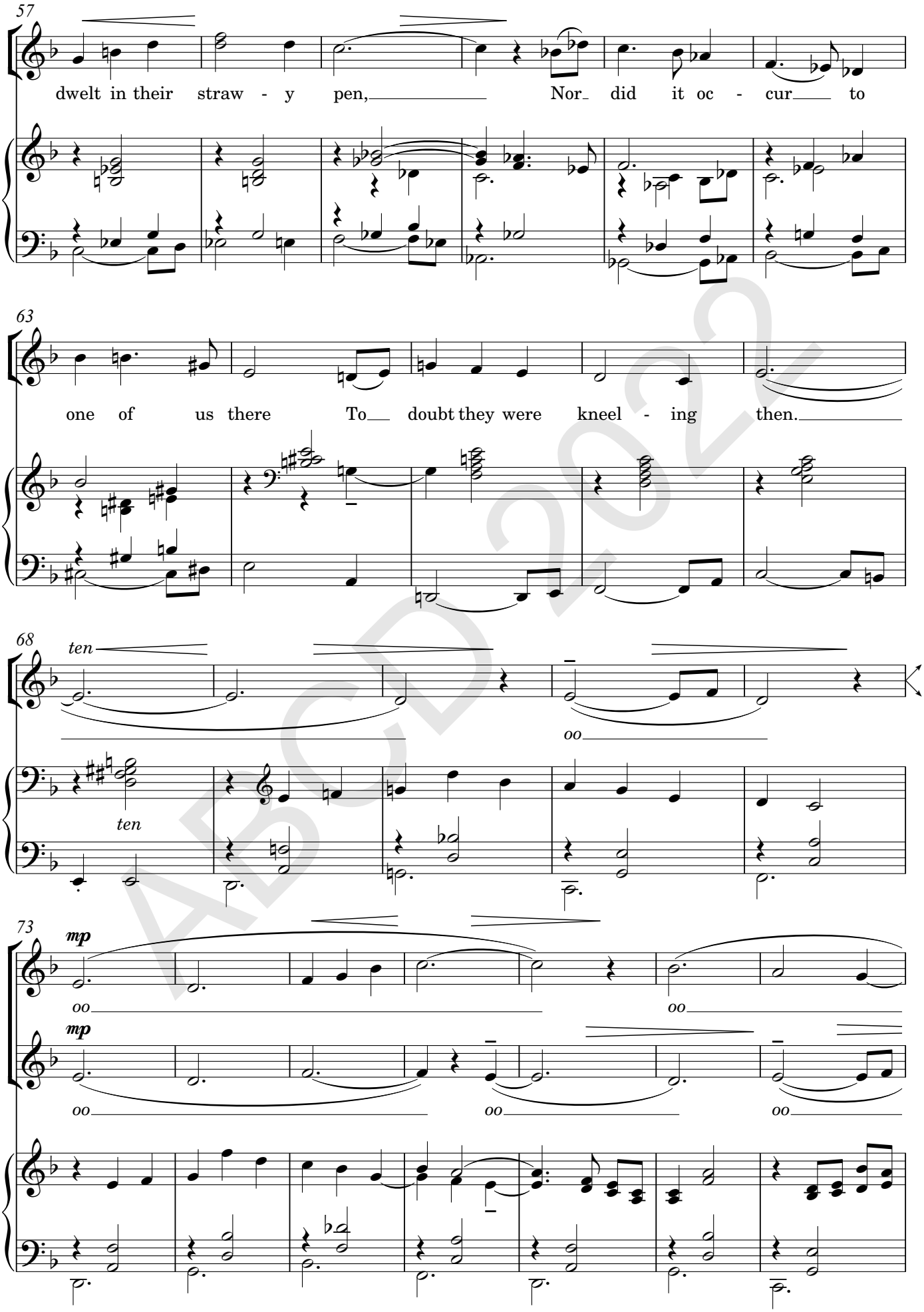

19
twelve of the clock. "Now they are all on their knees,"
24
An eld - er said as we sat in a flock By the
29
ten
em - bers in hearth - side ease.
ten
35
mp
oo
mp
oo
oo
oo

ABCD 2022


41
oo
oo
mp
oo
47
mf
52
mp
We pic - tured the meek mild crea - tures where They
mp

ABCD 2021


57
dwelt in their straw - y pen, Nor did it oc - cur to
63
one of us there To doubt they were kneel - ing then.
68
ten
oo
ten
73
mp
oo
oo
mp
oo
oo
oo

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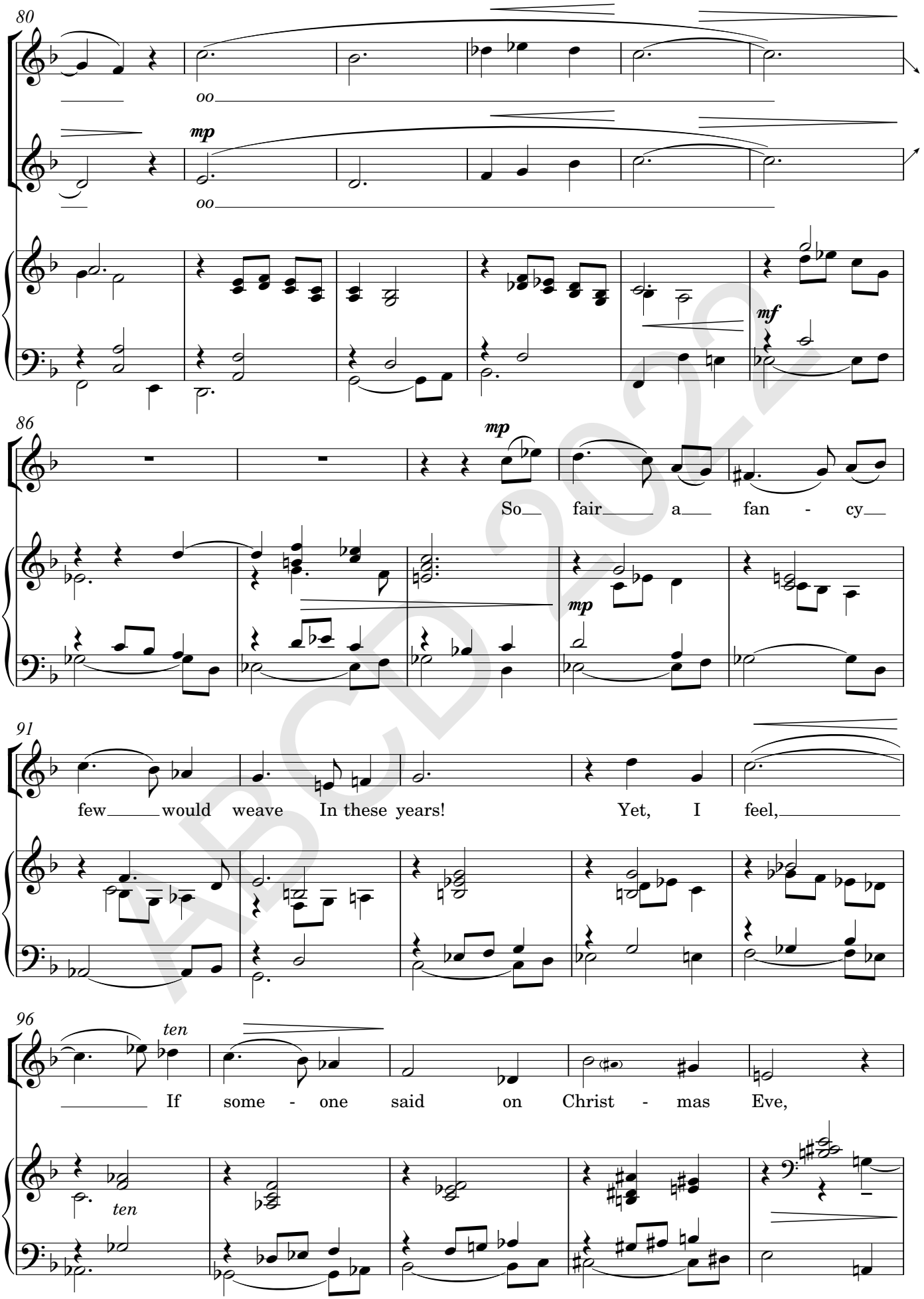
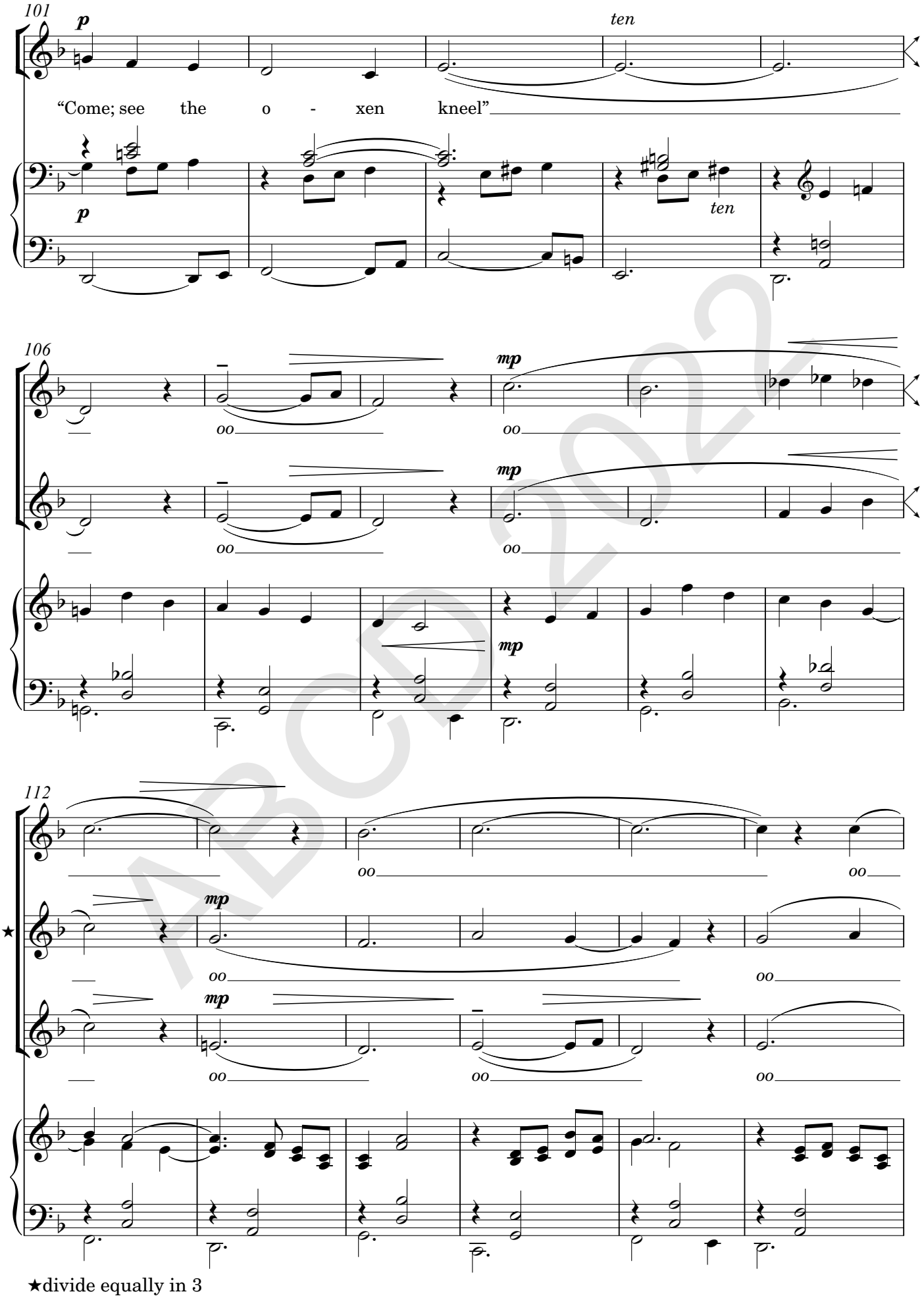

80
oo
mp
oo
mf
86
mp
So fair a fan - cy
mp
91
few would weave In these years! Yet, I feel,
96
ten
If some - one said on Christ - mas Eve,
ten

ABCD2024



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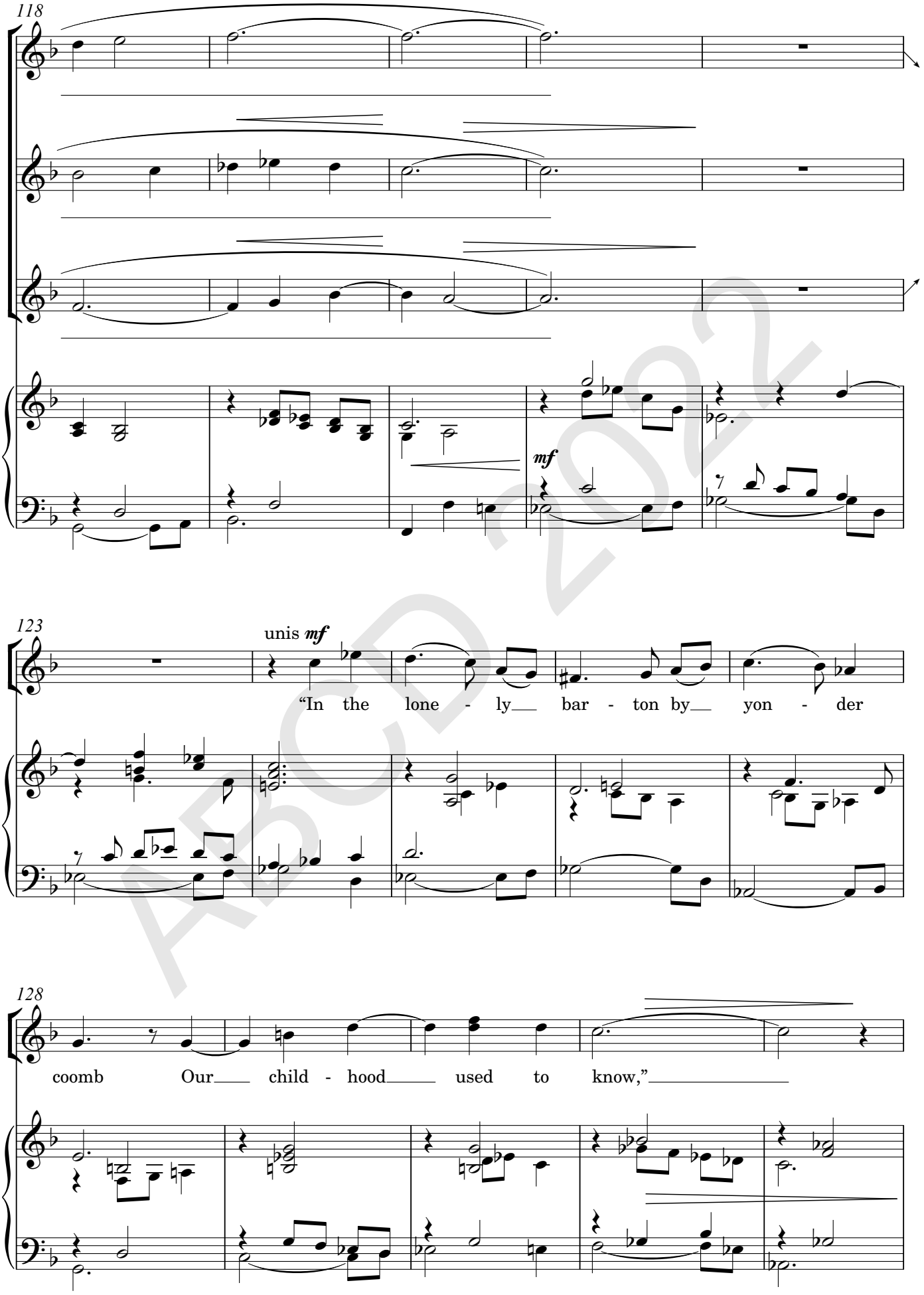
★divide equally in 3


118
mf
123
unis mf
"In the lone - ly bar - ton by yon - der
128
coomb Our child - hood used to know,"

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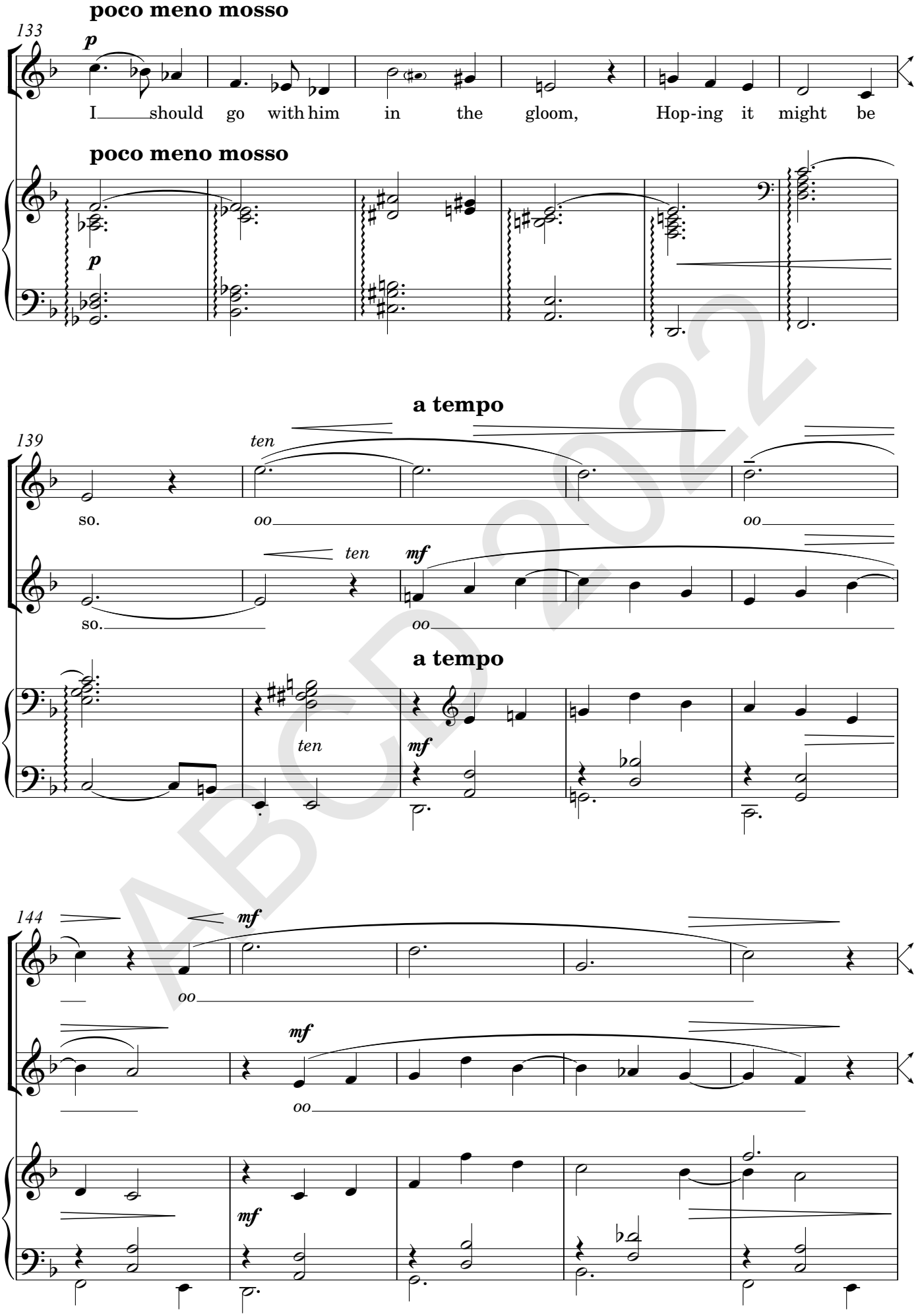
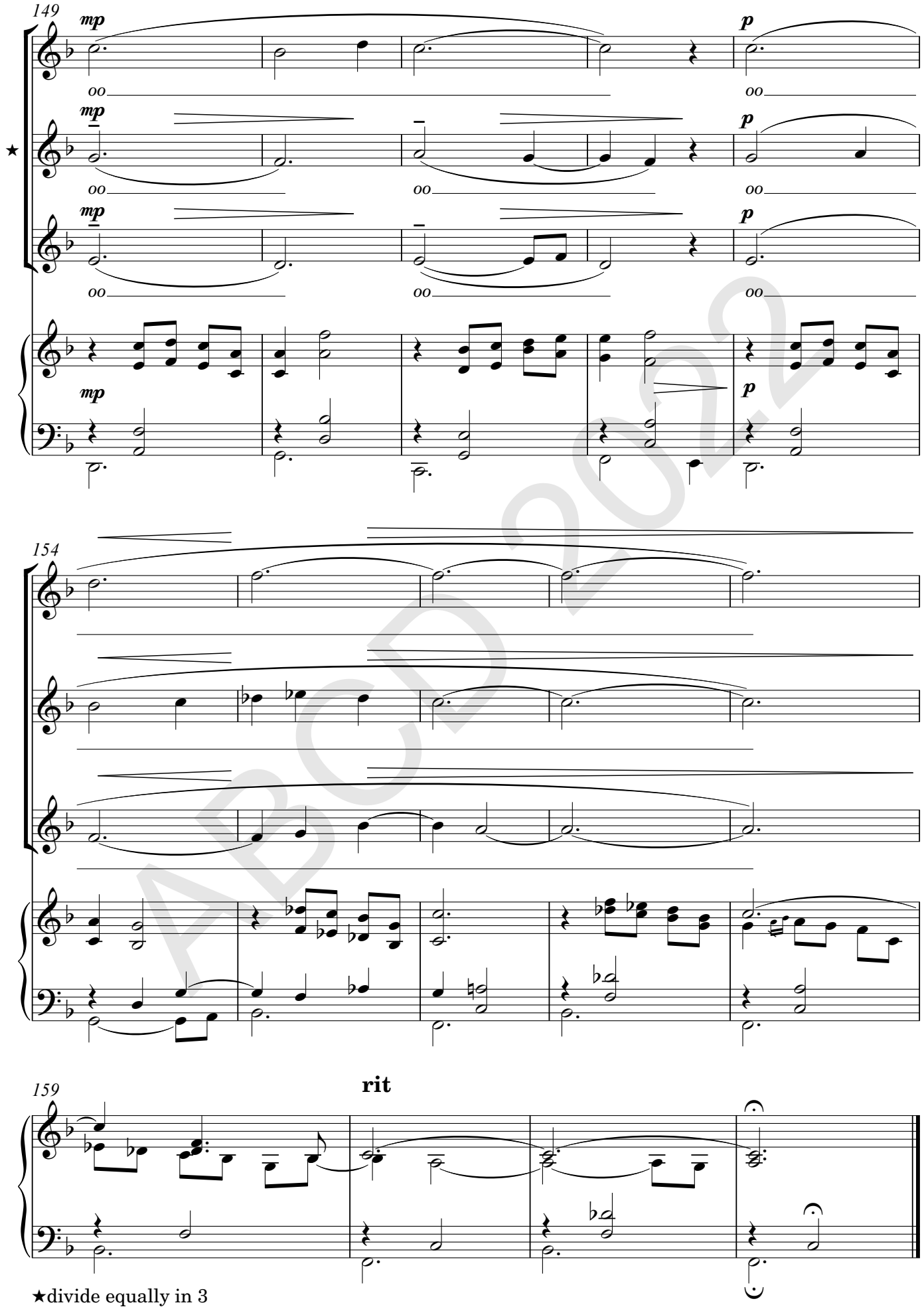

poco meno mosso
133
p
I should go with him in the gloom, Hop-ing it might be
poco meno mosso
p
a tempo
139
ten
so.
oo
ten
mf
so.
oo
a tempo
ten
mf
144
mf
oo
mf
oo
mf

ABCD 2022



★divide equally in 3

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Composer's note

Thomas Hardy's atmospheric poem, *The Oxen*, has long been a favourite evocation of the close-huddled nativity scene, and singing (literally) hundreds of carol services with the wonderful choir of St Bride's Church, Fleet Street, London it was always this reading that I anticipated the most. Another setting that I greatly admire is that of Jonathan Rathbone, and it was his sound world that encouraged me to give Hardy's words a jazz treatment, with strong influences from Bill Evans, Miles Davies and Justin Hurwitz's score to the 2016 feature film *La La Land*. The somewhat unsettling harmonic turns of the verses give way to an increasingly sweeping melodic refrain, all of which is underpinned by a gently undulating yet quietly driving piano part.

Duration: 4½ minutes

Text

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Thomas Hardy
(1840–1928)

Richard Wilberforce

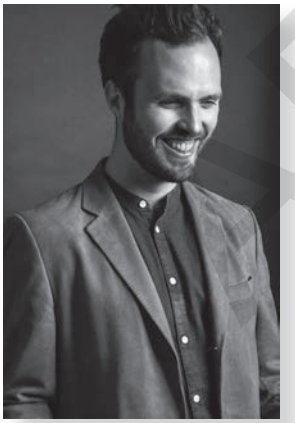

Photo: © Ben McKee

Originally from London, Richard studied at the University of Cambridge and the Royal College of Music, and now shares his time between France and the UK, where he holds a conducting and teaching position at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris, chorus masters the Leeds Philharmonic Chorus and fulfils his role as Composer-in-Residence with Trinity Boys Choir. His works are performed globally and have been recorded and broadcast by a number of leading choirs. For many years he was conductor of the Exon Singers and Director of the Hallé Youth Choir, and has conducted many of the UK's and France's foremost choirs. After an early success with the BBC Proms Young Composer Competition, Richard made composition the main focus of his time at Cambridge University, where he studied with Robin Holloway and Giles Swayne. His passion for writing for voices has been influenced by his first career as a countertenor, and one of his guiding ambitions as a composer is to write vocal lines that are rewarding for singers to sing, and melodies that are infectious!

RCD 2022

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Music setting derived from the composer's original by Jon Bunker